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Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 5,
October 25, 1962, 5:00 PM

E1, 11

Director McCone gave an intelligence briefing which contained no major new information. He listed fifteen ships en route to Cuba, among them the Graznyy, which is one of three oil tankers with deck tanks probably containing ammonia.

Mr. McCone noted that a Bloc ship would be entering the Panama Canal on November 2. It would be searched, as have Bloc ships transiting the Canal during the past seven years.

Mr. McCone said he had no information of any unusual developments in Europe.

Secretary Dillon noted that there had been a run on gold in Germany and to a lesser extent in London. His conclusions was that these gold purchases reflected the fear of the buyers.

Secretary McNamara said that the East German passenger ship Voelker Freundschaft was at the Cuban barrier. It is a fairly large ship, 525 feet long, and has been ordered to report its position every four hours. He said we faced a decision as to whether or not to stop it.

Secretary McNamara reported that the Lebanese ship which was to have been boarded had turned back before crossing the barrier. Late information on the Graznyy revealed that it was lying dead in the water. The result is that to date no ship has yet been boarded.

Secretary Rusk reported on diplomatic developments. He said the question was whether we can get Soviet strategic missiles out of Cuba or at least under UN control. He added that if there was any prospect of success in following a political track, we would have to keep heavy pressure on the Russians. He reported that Soviet representative Zorin in New York was furious about U Thant's proposals for U.S./USSR talks under UN sponsorship in New York, but that Khrushchev had agreed to such talks. Our position would be that during these next two days of preliminary discussions we must somehow stop the missile buildup in Cuba. We must know what is going on at the IRBM sites in Cuba and we need to know whether warheads have actually been delivered to Cuba. Shortly we must decide if the Soviet signals which they are sending us mean they are getting ready to talk or whether they are getting ready to attack us.

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Referring to possible UN action, Secretary Rusk said we would probably be able to get only a seven-to-two vote in the Security Council, but even so, action in the UN General Assembly was a possibility. He specifically mentioned one possibility, i.e. Latin American States proposing a nuclear-free zone in Latin America. He thought that many Latin American States would support this zone, along with many other UN members, and the Soviets would have a difficult time opposing it.

Secretary Rusk called attention to the relationship between our quarantine and Soviet-Cuban relations. The Cubans, who would not be able to survive in political isolation, must henceforth rely entirely on the Soviets.

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An appeal might be made to Castro to step aside so that a new government might break this complete dependence from here on out on the Soviet Union.

Secretary Rusk explained the nature of the preliminary talks which are to be held in New York in the next two or three days between U Thant and Zorin on one side and Stevenson and U Thant on the other. The purpose of these talks is to arrive at a solution of the crisis or, if no solution is possible, to provide a basis for later action, having been unable to negotiate a settlement. He said that these talks could not go on for two weeks, but must be limited to a very few days because the IRBM sites in Cuba are becoming operational and the IL-28 bombers will soon be able to fly.

Secretary McNamara said all of his actions were taken with a view to applying force gradually. The ten air reconnaissance missions flown today went well and he recommended that ten more missions be flown tomorrow. Other military actions being taken would be meaningful to the Russians but would still not force escalation.

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Secretary McNamara described night reconnaissance flights which involve dropping flares.

The Soviet missiles now have an eight-hour countdown. Low-level reconnaissance could give us intelligence as to whether the Soviet missiles are being placed in position to reduce the length of the countdown.

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Secretary Dillon noted that the urgency of the situation was considerably reduced if the Russians do not try to break the quarantine.

Secretary McNamara expressed his concern that if the New York talks go along very long, a kind of plateau will have been reached which would make the decision to take new actions very difficult.

Secretary Rusk summarized the political track as follows. We might get a unanimous vote in the OAS for our actions. We could expect a veto from the Russians in the Security Council. If the U Thant proposals were rejected, we could go to the General Assembly where as many as eighty States might support a Latin American denuclearization proposal. He was not ready to knock out the possibility of a political solution.

Secretary McNamara said there were many ways of increasing pressure on the Russians by military measures, i. e. quarantine, inspection at sea, surveillance, the addition of jet fuel to the list of products embargoes, and the holding of all petroleum tankers.

The Attorney General noted that if all Bloc cargo ships turn back rather than cross the quarantine barrier, we might let Soviet tankers through in order to avoid an incident at sea during the discussions in New York. He said we might decide that it was better to knock out the missiles by air attack than to stop a Soviet ship on the high seas.

Secretary Rusk suggested that we might

S(8) (U) (3) Such action would step up pressure on the Cubans without further use of military force.

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Director McCone agreed that such action would be effective because it would greatly reduce imports into Cuba and also take away from the Cubans their outgoing cargoes.

S(8) (U) (3) Secretary McNamara suggested that we might consider

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which could take up to several weeks. The purpose would be to throttle imports by Cuba.

In a discussion of other military measures, Mr. Rostow said any reconnaissance flights would have a beneficial effect on developments in New York.

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Secretary McNamara commented that the dropping of flares on the IRBM sites at night would be highly effective. General Taylor thought that the psychological effect of night reconnaissance would be entirely favorable as well as serving to keep up the pressure and providing more information about the readiness status of the strategic missiles.

Secretary Rusk said that he would seek to define our future political moves later in the evening.

Secretary Dillon stated his support of the idea of a Latin American denuclearized zone.

The Attorney General repeated his question as to whether we really wanted to stop a Soviet ship. He said he believed the Soviets had turned their ships around because they did not want us to see what was on them. The tankers, however, continue to move toward Cuba because they have nothing but petroleum. He said he felt that the measures we take should indicate clearly that we mean business but we should avoid a direct confrontation now.

Secretary McNamara said we should decide tonight to take measures tonight which would put us in a position of being ready to board Bloc ships approaching the barrier. We could let Soviet tankers through the quarantine and announce later we were putting an embargo on aviation gasoline. If we were going to board the East German ship we would have to decide tonight.

Both General Taylor and Secretary Dillon pointed out that we could not permit Soviet technicians to go through the quarantine even though technicians are not on the embargo list.

Secretary McNamara recommended that the East German ship not be stopped because it might be necessary for us to shoot at it or to ram it. There would be great danger to the some 1500 passengers aboard. The current situation is that the ship has been hailed and a U.S. destroyer is following it. If we ask it to stop and it does not, then we would have to use force. If in so doing we injure passengers and then discover there are no strategic missiles aboard, we would be in a very difficult situation. In addition, our world position would appear weak if we allow Soviet ships through the quarantine but stop an East German ship. The Voelker Freundschaft will make a landfall tomorrow and a decision must be made by 2:00 AM this morning if we want to stop it outside Cuban territorial waters.

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E, 15

At this point the President entered the Cabinet Room.

Secretary McNamara reviewed the situation with respect to the Voelker Freundschaft. He said the East German ship had left Rostov on October 11 and Leningrad on October 14.

(S)(2) The destroyer Pierce is following the ship which is still outside the barrier. Secretary McNamara recommended that we not stop this ship. B-2

The President referred to the message from U Thant asking us to avoid incidents pending the talks at New York.

Mr. Bundy said the East German ship was not covered by U Thant's message.

General Taylor and Director McCone asked Mr. McNamara

(S)(2) The President said the only argument against stopping the ship is U Thant's request for no incidents for the time being. He said that we would have to drop the other shoe soon.

Secretary McNamara repeated his earlier statement with respect to the difficulty of stopping a passenger ship. He preferred to stop the Graznyy tomorrow if Khrushchev did not accept U Thant's proposed mediation effort.

The Attorney General said he wished to describe again the other side of the argument. He said we could let the tanker through the barrier. As of now no other ships were approaching the barrier. Surveillance measures could be taken to keep the pressure on the Russians and provide time for the political measures suggested by Secretary Rusk without appearing to be backing off from a confrontation. He repeated his view that we may decide that it is better to avoid confronting the Russians by stopping one of their ships and to react by attacking the missiles already in Cuba.

Secretary Dillon said he preferred that the confrontation take place in Cuba rather than on the high seas.

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Secretary Rusk noted that the quarantine had become fully effective.

Secretary McNamara reported that there had been no response yesterday or today to our low-level reconnaissance flights. He recommended that we continue to fly daylight reconnaissance missions and add night reconnaissance not only to gain information, but also to convince the public that we are increasing the pressure on the Russians.

The President decided that we should not stop the East German ship. Tomorrow we will know the Soviet response to U Thant's proposal. We will let the tanker through the barrier and later add jet fuel to the list of products embargoed.

The Attorney General said that fifteen ships have turned back, which is an impressive action taken by the Russians. We must be careful that the Russians do not think that we are backing down.

Secretary Rusk called attention to the importance of the first case of our boarding a ship. If the ship carried deck cargo or dry cargo, the case would be different than a passenger ship which is a bad first case.

Mr. Rostow stated the argument for adding petroleum products to the blockade which he said would have a drastic effect on the Cuban economy.

The President again said we should let the East German passenger ship go through and we should seek to avoid any incident in order not to create a bad effect on U Thant's negotiations. We could decide tomorrow afternoon what more we should do after we know Khrushchev's reply to U Thant. He said we must act soon because work on the missile sites is still going on and we must back up very soon the firmness we have displayed up to now.

Ambassador Thompson pointed out that we must react very soon to Khrushchev's strong letter.

Secretary Rusk noted that Bloc shipping worldwide was behaving normally except for the ships in Cuban trade.

As the meeting concluded, Mr. McCone reported that some of the strategic missiles deployed in Cuba are now operational.

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The President had before him at the meeting a folder containing drafts of alternative next major moves (copy attached).

Bromley Smith